

VZCZCXRO4985
RR RUEHRG
DE RUEHBU #1099/01 1351444
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 151444Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4532
INFO RUEHSJ/AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE 0437
RUCNBEH/BRASILIA ENVIRONMENTAL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 BUENOS AIRES 001099

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE, SIPDIS

STATE FOR OES/PCI, WHA/BSC
STATE FOR IO/SHA - L. ROEDER
STATE FOR FSI/LMS/CMT - GERARD
STATE PASS AID FOR DCHA/OFDA
SAN JOSE FOR USAID/OFDA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [OFDA](#) [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [KNNP](#) [KSCA](#) [AEMR](#) [ASEC](#) [KESS](#) [AR](#)

SUBJECT: Argentina: Disaster Management System Overview

Reference: (A) 04 Buenos Aires 2574
(B) 03 Buenos Aires 1462
(C) 03 Buenos Aires 1447
(D) 05 Buenos Aires 2914
(E) Buenos Aires 186
(F) 04 Buenos Aires 008
(G) 05 Buenos Aires 2270

11. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified - Not For Internet Distribution.

12. (SBU) Summary: The GOA has a number of agencies in place to deal with disaster management, many with well-trained personnel and established action plans. Of them, the GOA Nuclear Regulatory Agency (ARN) is particularly well-organized with detailed contingency plans. However, a lack of clearly defined roles, poor funding, inefficient distribution of resources and inconsistent communications both among the federal agencies and with provincial governments could hamper the GOA's ability to handle a major disaster. End Summary.

13. (U) In the past, Argentina has suffered from severe earthquakes, such as the 2004 San Juan province earthquake that measured 6.3 on the Richter scale and was felt in thirteen provinces (reftel A) and severe flooding in Santa Fe province that caused over USD 250 million in damage and left over 116,000 homeless (reftels B,C). Disaster planners anticipate a repeat of both disasters. They are also cognizant of the possibility of a major air disaster at the City of Buenos Aires municipal airport, which is contiguous to a highway and commercial properties. The GOA is also keenly aware of the possibility of a mishap at one of its reactors and is working with the IAEA to prevent or contain such an occurrence.

14. (U) Various sections in the Embassy deal with the Argentine agencies responsible for disaster responses. The ESTH Section has been tasked with reporting and coordination with the GOA and the USAID Office of Disaster Relief Assistance (OFDA) should a disaster occur. OFDA has a contract employee in country who runs an active training program in Argentina, conducting 10 - 12 training programs per year in the provinces. In March 2005, the ESTH Section coordinated OFDA disaster recovery training for Embassy personnel, including FSNs. OFDA recently provided training to hazardous materials first responders in Buenos Aires.

16. (SBU) The MILGRP has previously conducted crisis response seminars with the GOA armed forces. According to the MILGRP representative, although the USG role in providing equipment directly to the armed forces is limited by Brooks' Amendment sanctions, the MILGRP would be able to provide logistical support and other services as requested by the GOA through the COM in the event of a major disaster. SouthCom Humanitarian Assistance

Program, working through the MILGRP, recently announced plans to provide funding for a project to assess GOA Disaster response and strengthen Emergency Operations Center capabilities. The Ambassador also has a USD 50,000 fund available for immediate disaster assistance.

17. (SBU) On paper, Argentina appears well-prepared to respond to a major disaster. In the GOA plan, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) is the starting point for activating the GOA's disaster relief program utilizing the Federal System for Emergencies (SIFEM) to coordinate disaster responses with the National Director of Planning and Civil Protection (DNPC) and the Emergency Cabinet (GADE). The GOA agencies have defined roles and, especially in the case of a nuclear disaster, detailed contingency plans. The USAID OFDA representative in Argentina and Post's RSO both stated that many of the agencies involved have a reputation for high standards of training and many are well-equipped.

Overview of GOA Agencies Involved in Disaster Response

18. (SBU) Ministry of the Interior (MOI) - As part of its mandate to oversee central government relations with provincial governments, the MOI is tasked with planning for and responding to natural disasters throughout the country. It serves as the main nexus for communication with provincial civil defense networks and firefighters. It includes the National Director of Planning and Civil Protection (DNPC) and the Federal System for Emergencies (SIFEM). Other agencies under the control of the MOI include the Argentine Federal Police, Gendarmeria, and Coast Guard. Federal firefighters come under the control of the Federal Police and are adequately trained and equipped. Overall,

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the MOI is better funded than many other disaster relief agencies, but lacks quality equipment in many areas.

- National Director and Civil Protection (DNPC)- A division of the Ministry of the Interior, DNPC is responsible for disaster relief policy and plans. It maintains a 24-hour emergency radio communications service. In the event of a disaster, DNPC is supposed to coordinate federal intervention with local security forces, federal police, civil defense, fire departments, and provincial officials. (Comment: According to the USAID OFDA representative, coordination efforts are frequently unsuccessful. End Comment.) DNPC sends damage assessment teams to the affected areas and reports on resources needed for disaster effects mitigation. Offices that collaborate with this organization in the event of a disaster include National Institute of Earthquake Prevention (INPRES), Hydrological Alert System of the Parana River, National Institute of Water, Naval Hydrographical Service, National Meteorological Service and the Coast Guard. These agencies have a reputation for effective action utilizing highly specialized employees who possess advanced technical skills.

- SIFEM (Federal System for Emergencies) - Created in 1996 and based on the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) model, SIFEM was established to improve interagency cooperation and coordination and work through consensus of the provinces and the central government. Originally overseen by the National Director of Planning and Civil Protection (DNPC), the MOI transferred SIFEM operational responsibilities to the Chief of the Federal Police in 2005. (Comment: The USAID OFDA representative told ESTHOFF that the Federal Police as yet do not have a defined role in emergencies and its personnel are inadequately trained to handle disasters. End Comment.) He said that the system is currently under a review that has an indefinite timetable established for completion. In the interim, the Federal police are responsible for damage evaluation and the DNPC provides risk assessment. The USAID OFDA representative added that, in reality, the organization has no structure, does little to support disaster operations and has little political.

19. (SBU) Ministry of Defense (MOD) - The MOD directs and guides

all branches of the military. After major a disaster, the Ministry has in the past taken over role of general disaster coordinator. The MOD has conducted studies and exercises dealing with most major disaster situations within Argentina and has modern emergency equipment located throughout most regions of the country. Minister of Defense Nilda Garre has placed a priority on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance for the Armed Forces and has the authority to appoint two MOD officials to the DNPC. However, a lack of sufficient operational funding hampers the MOD's ability to maintain and upgrade much of its equipment, which limits its effectiveness during a disaster scenario. Available manpower is unpredictable.

¶10. (U) Emergency Cabinet (GADE) - Formalized in the SIFEM enabling legislation, GADE refers to the GOA's temporary emergency cabinet, composed of the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Economics and Public Services, the Minister of Education and Culture, the Minister of Health and Environment and the Minister of Social Development. The Minister of the Interior convenes GADE to determine the needed response during an emergency.

¶11. (U) Minister of Health & Environment (MOH) - The MOH directs disaster relief activities through the National Director of Health Emergency (DINESA), which oversees food distribution and health care in evacuation centers and works with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Doctors without Borders, Doctors of the World, and Foundation IDEM. DINESA has emergency supplies on-hand sufficient to care for 10,000 civilians for 15 days. The MOH is also Post's main contact for avian influenza related issues (reftel D). The Secretariat of the Environment, which falls under the control of the MOH, is responsible for the national forest fire response plan.

¶12. (U) Nuclear Regulatory Authority (ARN) - The ARN operates independently of the other agencies and, in addition to its role as overseer of nuclear energy production, creates contingency plans for nuclear accidents. As part of this process, the ARN coordinates emergency action plans with the Federal Police, the National Gendarmeria, the Coast Guard and local hospitals. It is well-organized and well-funded.

¶13. (U) Secretariat of Housing (SOH) - The SOH establishes guidelines for the construction of temporary housing for victims of natural disasters and determines if existing dwellings should be evacuated.

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¶14. (SBU) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) - The MFA contributes to disaster relief efforts through the Secretariat of International Humanitarian Assistance which oversees the White Helmets, a team of volunteer medical professionals and technicians from various disciplines. While the MFA does not have a history of effective coordination with other ministries, it did coordinate with the MOH to send emergency mental health teams from both ministries, including the White Helmets, to Jefferson Parish, Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (reftel G). The MFA is also collaborating with other ministries, most notably the MOH, on Argentina's avian influenza response plans (reftel D).

Disaster Response Scenarios

¶15. (SBU) In the event of a natural disaster (forest fires, floods, storms, earthquakes, volcanoes, etc.), the RSO and USAID OFDA representative have provided input into the below GOA response scenarios (in roughly sequential order):

- Provincial government receives information on an actual disaster or a pending disaster, such as an approaching storm.
(Comment: The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) scheduled the repositioning of a NOAA geostationary satellite over the South American continent for

October 2006, which will greatly improve the GOA's currently limited ability to provide public warnings about inclement weather (reftel E).

- In severe situations, the provincial government may request assistance from the National Government
- Emergency Cabinet (GADE) meets to determine which agencies should respond. In a major disaster, control is often passed to the Ministry of Defense.
- If necessary, the provincial government assists in evacuation procedures.
- Provincial and municipal firemen, along with the provincial and civil defense officials, execute the evacuation plan.
- The Head of the Cabinet of Ministries informs the general public on the magnitude of the situation through the media and may issue public requests for evacuation.
- Relief agencies through their respective Ministries, submit requests to the national government to fund provision of emergency supplies.

¶16. (SBU) In the event of a nuclear accident, the GOA response will be as follows (in roughly sequential order):

- Representatives of affected nuclear facility notify Nuclear Regulatory Agency (ARN) Head of Emergency.
- ARN Head of Emergency notifies civil organizations and security forces and instructs them to take action based on predefined procedures. The Gendarmeria (Ministry of Interior) would take the lead role in securing the facilities and distributing iodine to victims. The ARN contingency plan also calls for coordination with the armed forces and Coast Guard.
- ARN alerts evacuation and management teams and medical personnel to assess potential biological effects of the radioactive release.

¶17. (SBU) In the event of a biological or chemical accident, the GOA response will be as follows (in roughly sequential order):

- Provincial government receives information on accident.
- In severe situations, the provincial government requests assistance from the national government.
- Within Buenos Aires, dedicated HAZMAT teams from the Federal Police bombaderos would respond. Outside of Buenos Aires, provincial police bombaderos would be responsible. The Ministry of Health and the Environment is also notified.
- The provincial government would assist with evacuation procedures, if necessary.

¶18. (SBU) In the event of a major airplane crash:

- The airport authorities will request assistance from the Ministry of Defense (MOD).
- The MOD, through the Air Force, will coordinate the relief efforts.
- If available, the Federal Police will mobilize its fire fighting units (placed at 30 of the 50 major airports), otherwise local volunteer fire departments will have responsibility for fire fighting and rescue.

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¶19. (SBU) Mass transit Accident (other than an airplane crash):

- These are typically handled by the appropriate provincial and/or municipal governments. The federal government may assist if required, but this is not common.

¶20. (SBU) Large structural fires (apartment buildings, nightclubs, etc.):

- These are typically handled by the appropriate provincial and/or municipal governments.
- In Buenos Aires, the Federal Police will mobilize its fire fighting units (reftel F).

Shortcomings of the Argentine Emergency Response System

¶21. (SBU) Lack of communication and coordination among Ministries and agencies may hamper the ability of the GOA to effectively deal with a major disaster. According to the USAID OFDA representative, political decisions often weigh heavily in the GOA's decision to declare a disaster. When a disaster is declared, political factors can influence decisions by the Emergency Cabinet (GADE). As a result, the agency with the expertise needed for a particular situation may not be immediately informed. In a major disaster, the ministers cede authority to the Ministry of Defense (MOD), which conducts frequent mock disaster relief exercises, but in the past has excluded participation by civilian agencies. RSO pointed out that, although disaster response teams responded quickly to a 2004 nightclub fire (reftel F) that ultimately resulted in 196 deaths, victims were loaded into overcrowded ambulances, in some cases without proper triage procedures, and taken to the nearest available hospital.

¶22. (SBU) Uneven resource allocation among Ministries, each of which is responsible for maintaining separate emergency relief supplies, often impedes disaster preparedness. For example, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) is adequately funded, but lacks sufficient equipment, while the MOD has modern equipment, but lacks funding for maintenance and upkeep of it. In many cases, provincial governments lack sufficient funding to handle serious disaster situations.

¶23. (SBU) Provincial governments have no constitutional obligation to coordinate disaster relief efforts with the federal government. This results in wasted time and resources as provincial and federal agencies pursue different approaches to resolve the same crisis. Provincial and federal governments have enacted a large amount of contradictory and confusing disaster relief legislation that creates bureaucratic inefficiencies and red tape. USAID OFDA representative pointed to the Federal Defense and the Interior Security statutes as examples of this type of legislation.

¶24. (SBU) Insufficient training plagues some Argentine disaster response units. Provincial volunteer fire departments, responsible for fire protection in most areas of the country and at 20 of the country's airports, lack sufficient training and equipment to handle a large scale disaster.

¶25. (SBU) Many non-governmental organizations (NGO) that often form the backbone of disaster relief efforts elsewhere are not a key factor in Argentine disaster relief planning. According to the OFDA representative, the Argentine Red Cross has a widespread reputation for mismanagement and is not considered a viable organization for disaster relief in the country. The Argentine branch of the Catholic relief organization Caritas has withdrawn from joint-disaster relief planning with the GOA, due to deterioration in relations with the current federal administration.

¶26. (SBU) Comment: The GOA appears to respond to most disasters on a case-by-case basis, with no set plan in place for most disasters. The shortcomings in the GOA disaster response system may limit the country's ability to effectively cope with a catastrophic situation. Reform efforts are stalled and, as RSO noted, although the capacity of GOA teams to internalize reform efforts is higher than in other countries in the region, real efforts to enforce changes may be of limited duration. End Comment.

¶27. (U) To see more Buenos Aires reporting, visit our classified website at: <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/buenosaires.>

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